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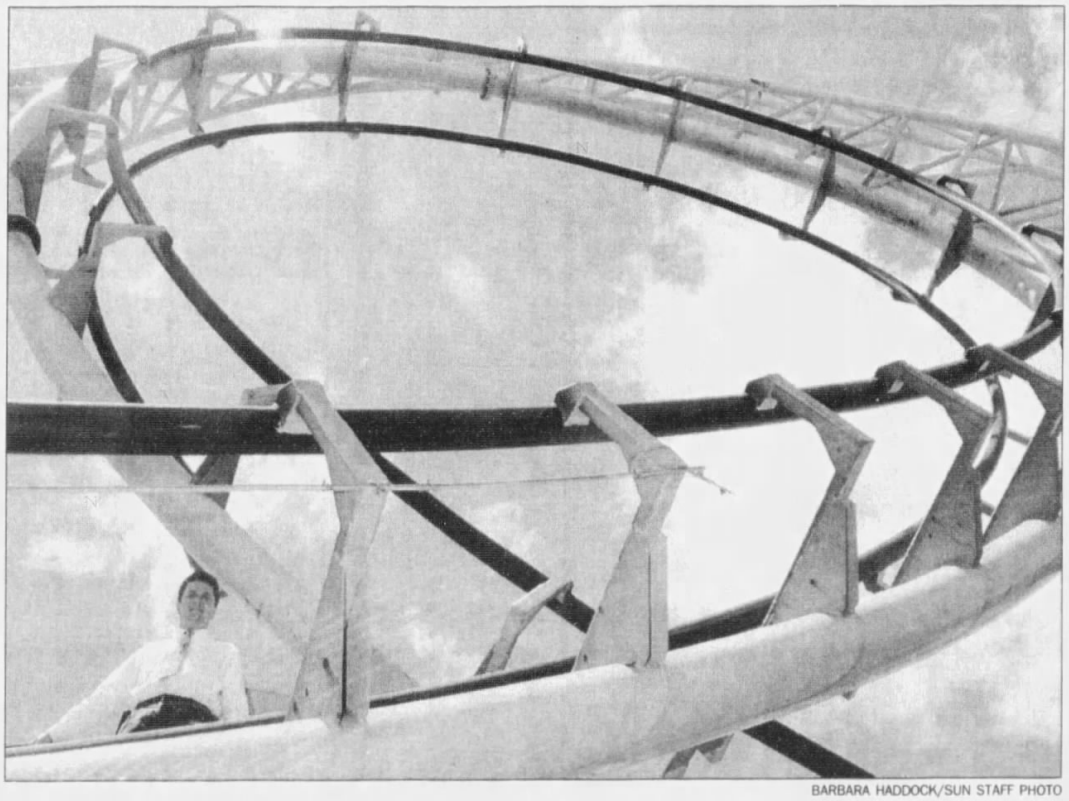

BARBARA HADDOCK/SUN STAFF PHOTO

Manager Hue Eichelberger stands on catwalk of Python ride at Adventure World, formerly Wild World.

A BOLD NEW ADVENTURE

By Jay Hancock
Sun Staff Writer

Theme park's fortunes change

After 20 years of seesaw management, sliding finances and roller-coaster attendance, Adventure World may finally be getting it right.

The Largo theme park, which changed its name in March from Wild World, is trying to become a regional, family-friendly attraction instead of mainly a local water park for teens.

It has spent heavily on rides and other features — about $15 million worth — since Oklahoma City-based Tierco Group Inc. bought it two years ago.

So far the strategy seems to be working. Adventure World boosted attendance by 40 percent last year and expects a 20 percent-plus increase for the season that started this month, Tierco officials said. They wouldn't disclose precise figures, but around 500,000 people visit a year, they said.

The park is winning praises from analysts and may be defying a bit of conventional industry wisdom: that Virginia's Kings Dominion, which lures 2 million annually, has a lock on the fun-ride business near Washington and Baltimore.

Theme park consultant Dennis Speigel called Adventure World's attendance increase last year "really enormous and really quite eye popping."

He ought to know. Mr. Speigel, president of International Theme Park Services in Cincinnati, was Kings Dominion's general manager until 1981. Once merely a pebble in Kings Dominion's water flume, Adventure World now must be reckoned with, Mr. Speigel said.

"That park has really moved from one of what we call the small, mom-and-pop parks to a major park," Mr. Speigel said.

Wild World was started by ABC-TV in the 1970s as an animal safari attraction. But it never succeeded, going through several ownership changes and struggling for a focus even after it added a few rides and water slides.

Tierco, which earned $1.35 million on $22 million in revenue last year and owns two Oklahoma theme parks, bought the 115-acre Largo attraction from a group led by Washington banker John J. Mason.

The price was undisclosed. But Adventure World General Manager Hue L. Eichelberger, 36, said Tierco has pumped a total of $25 mil-

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ADVENTURE: Park's fortunes change

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lion into the park, including the purchase price, of which $15 million has been for new attractions.

Tierco doubled the number of Adventure World rides to more than 30. New features include an additional roller coaster, a Ferris wheel, a teacup ride, bumper cars and a river rapids ride. The park is also adding "themed" trappings and scenery, including a "circus" area for young children, tropical island props in the water park and a Wild West village with a stunt gunfight show.

It's still no Kings Dominion, and never will be. But Adventure World's trumps are that it's closer to Baltimore and Washington — and cheaper. Adventure World is $19.99 for adults this year vs. Kings Dominion's $26.95.

"I think there is a definite niche" for Adventure World, said Tom Powell, associate publisher of *Amusement Business*, a Nashville-based trade publication. "But if they end up pricing themselves like Kings Dominion, they won't be successful."

Tierco's stock is registered publicly but is mostly owned by institutions and seldom trades.

Adventure

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